

## “I’m not really healed ... I’m just bandaged up”: Perceptions of Healing Among Former Students of Indian Residential Schools

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### Abstract

Attempts at resolution between former students of Indian residential schools and the non-Aboriginal Canadian population began with the signing of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement in 2006. The Settlement Agreement outlined provisions for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to document the stories of former students and for the Resolution Health Support Program to offer emotional and cultural support to former students and their families. Although former students have catalogued their stories through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process, experiences of healing from the events of Indian residential schools remain relatively unknown. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of healing among former Indian residential school students. In partnership with an Aboriginal support agency in a small Saskatchewan city, we interviewed 10 Aboriginal people affected by residential schools. The focus of the interviews was to generate participants’ conceptions and experiences of healing regarding their residential school experiences. We found all participants continued to experience physical, mental, emotional, and/or spiritual impacts of residential school attendance. Disclosure of their experiences was an important turning point for some participants. Their efforts to move on varied from attempting to “forget” about their experience to reconnecting with their culture and/or following their spiritual, religious, or faith practices. Participants also noted the profound intergenerational effects of residential schools and the need for communities to promote healing. The findings will be used to guide an assessment of the healing needs among this population in Saskatchewan.

### Keywords

Indian residential schools, Resolution Health Support Program, healing, interviews, qualitative research

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### Introduction

In an effort to aggressively assimilate Aboriginal children<sup>1</sup> into white society, the government of Canada created the Indian residential school (IRS) system in the late 1800s. Approximately 150,000 First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children attended these schools that were funded by the government of Canada and operated by churches<sup>2</sup> for decades, with the last closing in 1996 (Miller, 1996). Typically, children were taken from their homes, families, and communities and placed in residences. While former students have acknowledged some positive aspects of IRS, stories of sexual, emotional, physical, and spiritual abuse and neglect are far more numerous (e.g., Morrissette, 1994; Morrissette & Goodwill, 2013). Although not every child was abused in these ways, the experience of some degree of cultural annihilation was evident for the vast majority of students (Gone, 2013; Miller, 1996; Shewchuk, 2012). Children were systematically separated from their parents and communities and often suffered the loss of their native language and cultural practices (Legacy of Hope, 2014). Gone (2013) identified IRS impacts as complex, collective, and cumulative, affecting communities as well as individuals. These impacts have been characterized as a particular form of posttraumatic stress disorder called *historical trauma* (Braveheart-Jordan & DeBruyn, 1995; Gone, 2013; Shewchuk, 2012). Although the term historical trauma originated to describe the experiences of Holocaust survivors (Mohatt, Thomson, Thai, & Tebes, 2014), and its use has been criticized as being presumptive and reductive of the experiences of First Nations people (Kirmayer, Gone, & Moses, 2014), for the purpose of this study we employed the construct of historical trauma in a simple form—to mean psychological trauma and loss experienced as a result of involvement in a historical event (i.e., attendance at Indian residential school).

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<sup>1</sup> We used the term ‘Aboriginal’ in this paper to reflect the literature on the topic of IRS and to describe our sample. The participants in this study described themselves as ‘Aboriginal’.

<sup>2</sup> The specific churches were the Presbyterian Church, the United Church of Canada, the Anglican Church of Canada, and the Catholic Church (*Baxter v. Attorney General of Canada*, 2006).

It has been argued that historical trauma has continued to affect multiple subsequent generations of Aboriginal people, even those who did not attend schools themselves (Legacy of Hope Foundation, 2014; Pearce et al., 2008; Tait, 2003; Waldram, 2008). For example, second-generation Aboriginal adults have reported higher levels of depression compared to Aboriginal adults without a parent who attended IRS (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, 2011). Other findings by Bombay, Matheson, and Anisman (2014) indicated that higher depressive symptoms in IRS offspring are influenced by their perceptions of past discriminatory experiences and considerations of Aboriginal heritage as central to their identity. Research in two British Columbia cities found sexual abuse in Aboriginal youth predicted negative health outcomes and vulnerability to HIV infection (Pearce et al., 2008). The authors linked their findings to unresolved historical trauma. In an on-reserve population health survey, Manitoba researchers investigated the mental health impact of residential school attendance on former students and their children (Elias et al., 2012). Direct or indirect (via parent, grandparent, or spouse) exposure to IRS was associated with a history of physical, mental, emotional, or sexual abuse/violence and suicide behaviour. The authors concluded that historical trauma operates at the individual, family, and community level (Elias et al., 2012).

To begin the resolution of the harm caused by residential schools, former students, with the support of the Assembly of First Nations and Inuit organizations, pursued legal action against the Canadian federal government and the churches. The result was the 2006 Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, the largest class-action settlement in Canadian history. The agreement, which provided financial compensation to former students, called for the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) and funded the Resolution Health Support Program (RHSP) to assist former students and their families during the resolution period (Government of Canada, 2016). On June 11, 2008, the Canadian prime minister publicly recognized the consequences of the IRS policy as “profoundly negative and that this policy has had a lasting and damaging impact on Aboriginal culture, heritage and language” (Government of Canada, 2008, para. 4). Official recognition of IRS impacts by the federal government was intended to be part of the beginning of reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada (Government of Canada, 2008).

The establishment of the TRC, however, has not been universally acknowledged as a step forward. Niezen (2013) interviewed former IRS students as well as Oblate priests and nuns, and examined testimonies, texts, and visual materials produced by the commission. Niezen ultimately questioned the utility of the commission, suggesting there was little reconciliation with perpetrators because they did not attend TRC gatherings. He concluded that the commission was likely a political act to assuage victims without addressing the need for ongoing action to right the wrongs that have occurred.

While efforts have been made to recognize these harms and ameliorate their effects, there has been very little written in the research literature about the healing experiences of former IRS students. Stories about residential school experiences have been gathered by the TRC to acknowledge the experiences of former IRS students and to focus on the needs for healing (Truth

and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). It has been suggested that revealing the truth about residential school experiences can initiate the healing process (Reimer, Bombay, Ellsworth, Fryer, & Logan, 2010). However, details regarding what can continue to sustain the healing process for this population remain relatively unknown in the research literature.

It is useful to tease out some of the meaning in the construct of healing. Healing is a medical metaphor that is grounded in arbitrary and ethnocentric criteria (Comaroff, 1981). As Lavallee and Poole (2010) point out, “most advocates of mental health recovery are white with little attention given to culture and racism” (p. 272). They note that colonization has negatively affected Aboriginal Peoples’ health. They observe that Aboriginal people must go beyond Western notions of recovery and look at physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being from an Aboriginal perspective. In this regard, the Legacy of Hope Foundation (2011) has identified some examples of promising healing practices that may be adaptable for Aboriginal communities.

However, the role that mainstream mental health providers could play in the promotion of healing among former IRS students and their families remains mostly unexplored. The ultimate goal of our research program is to understand the meaning of healing from the perspective of former IRS students to transfer this knowledge to mental health providers. The aim of the current study was to understand the healing experiences of a sample of former IRS students from First Nations communities in Saskatchewan.

### **Methods**

Prior to commencement of the study we obtained ethics approval from the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics committee. Ethics approval was contingent on adherence to the Canadian Institutes of Health Research Policy Chapter 9 regarding ethics of health research with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people (CIHR, NSERC, & SSHRC, 2014). In compliance with Chapter 9, we worked in partnership with the RHSP housed within a Saskatchewan Aboriginal organization. In consultation with Elders and RHSP workers, the program staff, we created the recruitment script, consent form, and interview guide. The program staff collaborated on the research design and played a key role in participant recruitment and data verification. The RHSP, established in accordance with the IRS Settlement Agreement (IRSSA), has provided emotional and cultural support to former IRS students and their families. One specific focus of the program has been to support individuals as they undergo adjudication proceedings related to IRS abuses, a provision of the IRSSA called the Independent Assessment Process.

The recruitment process began with RHSP staff approaching former IRS students from two First Nations communities that had received emotional and cultural support from their program. Program staff told potential participants that researchers from the university were looking for volunteers to take part in an interview study about healing from the impact of

attending a residential school. Participants received compensation for their mileage and any childcare costs.

The researchers obtained informed consent from participants and conducted the interviews on three separate occasions at the organization. The researchers who conducted the interviews had both clinical and research experience with former IRS students. Typically, the semi-structured interviews were conducted according to gender with the female co-author interviewing female participants and the male co-author interviewing male participants. Duration of the interviews ranged from approximately 45 to 75 minutes, with a typical duration of 60 minutes.

In addition to asking general demographic questions, the interview was designed to probe individual perspectives on healing (e.g., What does healing mean to you? What does healing mean when you think about your experiences of residential school?), perspectives on family healing (e.g., What role has your family played in your experiences of healing?), community perspectives (e.g., What do you think healing from experiences of residential schools means to the Aboriginal community in general?), and general perspectives (e.g., What do you think healing from experiences of residential schools means to the non-Aboriginal community in general?). Our intent was to understand what “healing” meant to former students; we did not ask specific questions about their own personal healing experiences. Participants were invited to offer further input at the end of the interview and were encouraged to ask any additional questions of the interviewer.

The RHSP workers invited 12 former IRS students to participate in the study. Of those invited, a total of 10 former students attended one of the three interview days at the RHSP location and all consented to participate. Six males (age late 40s to early 70s) and four females (mid-40s to late 60s) were interviewed. All participants reported registered Indian status, lived on a reserve, and had attended between 2 and 12 years at an IRS.

### **Data Analysis**

All interviews were electronically recorded and transcribed. Each transcript was reviewed and compared to the original audio recording for accuracy. All transcript data were housed in NVivo v.10. Once verified, a transcript was read from beginning to end. This analysis was an iterative and incremental process repeated for each participant and then across participants. Field notes were maintained throughout the process. The process of maintaining field notes was to promote self-reflection and to guide discussion between the researchers.

We chose interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to analyze the transcript data. IPA originated from the desire of psychological researchers to understand qualitative experience within the mainstream of psychology (Smith, 1996) and has expanded as an analytical technique to the field of health research (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Based within the three fields of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, IPA enabled us to focus on the particular meanings of healing for each participant (i.e., their responses to interview questions about what healing meant to them) while considering our interpretations of

their meanings (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Our awareness of our interpretations of what healing meant to participants was an important step in the analysis and required iterative reflection upon the data.

The process for data analysis was derived from a six-step description of IPA (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009): (1) reading and rereading the transcript, (2) taking initial notes, (3) developing initial themes, (4) searching for connections among emergent themes, (5) moving to the next case, and (6) looking for patterns across cases. In following this approach, after all the individual transcripts were read and general notes were made on prevailing meanings within each interview, we developed initial themes for each participant, and then made connections between participants. We noted important commonalities and differences in these meanings.

The Results section presents themes and interpretations gathered from the interviews. The quotations are verbatim from participant interview transcripts and de-identified using pseudonyms. As IPA principles recognize, the findings are inextricably tied to the researchers’ perspectives, ideas, attitudes, and experiences. Wherever possible these perspectives were identified and acknowledged. In cases where the researchers and participants do not share the same cultural background, the acknowledgement of these potential differences is particularly important.

### **Relationship**

For this study, we entered into a written, collaborative agreement with an organization in a small Saskatchewan city that provides services to former IRS students. The agreement outlined the study’s purpose and protocol, and the roles of the researchers and the organization. How the findings would be disseminated was also stipulated. When analysis was complete, we met with the organization to discuss the findings. Two support workers who were former IRS students and the organization’s director provided feedback on the themes that we had derived. The purpose of this non-audiotaped session was to verify the findings and to offer the organization documentation from the study.

### **Results**

We identified five themes and three subthemes from the participants’ interview transcripts (see Table 1). We found the themes were often interconnected and reflected the complexity of the perceptions of healing in this sample of former IRS students. For example, many participants considered disclosing impacts of IRS to be an important part of their healing process. For some participants, disclosure was initiated by spirituality/religion/faith or by reconnecting with culture. The relationship between these themes could also be bidirectional, where, for instance, disclosure of IRS impacts led to a reconnection to culture. Although not every participant described every theme displayed in Table 1, all participants identified IRS impacts.

**Table 1**  
*Integrated Themes Related to Participants’ Perceptions of Healing from Indian Residential School Experiences*

Theme	
<b>Impacts of IRS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unanimously, participants identified negative impacts</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In many cases participants did not report healing experiences</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many participants described a loss of identity</li> </ul>
Subtheme: Forgetting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In some cases, alcohol was used in an unsuccessful attempt to forget the trauma—alcohol use only exacerbated the trauma</li> </ul>
<b>Disclosure</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disclosure was a turning point, a critical element of healing that reduced the impact of IRS experiences</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listening to others’ IRS experiences had the power to transform isolation and elicit change</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disclosure occurred in a formal (e.g., counselling) setting for some</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disclosure was strongly related to other themes</li> </ul>
<b>Reconnection with culture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Closely tied with the ongoing process of spirituality/faith/religion</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helped to re-establish identity for some</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reconnecting with culture sometimes included formal counselling</li> </ul>
<b>Religion/spirituality/faith</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For some, the spiritual beliefs of culture coincided with the spiritual beliefs of their adopted religion</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spirituality was an essential ingredient for healing</li> </ul>
Subtheme: Forgiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spirituality provided a path to forgiveness of oneself and others</li> </ul>
<b>Moving beyond IRS impacts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some participants noted the importance of moving beyond IRS impacts, particularly for subsequent generations</li> </ul>
Subtheme: Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educating the non-Aboriginal community about the impacts of IRS facilitated healing</li> </ul>

## IRS Impacts

A central theme in our discussions with participants was not related to healing per se, but was indicative of the profound and lingering impacts of IRS attendance. Although we had been explicit in the focus of the study—that is, our intent was to understand participants’ experiences of healing from IRS impacts—participants repeatedly remarked about the long-lasting impacts of the events that occurred at IRS. One of the most poignant illustrations of the enduring consequences for participants was expressed in Brenda’s metaphor: “I’m not really healed ... I’m just up bandaged up. ... Different bandages. Different places.”

Similar to residential school impacts reported by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015), such as loss of culture, language, and parenting skills, all participants identified negative effects of IRS attendance. Some of these effects were physical; others were psychological. A particularly harmful impact was loss of identity. As Sylvia described this loss:

*And that’s the way I was. I was—with myself, like I couldn’t really take myself, see myself through, you know, [non-fluent] as a, as a person. Like, I didn’t know who I was. And that’s really bothered me, I guess, all these years. Like, I—’cuz I left my family for so long every 10 months out of every year for 9 years and just going back in the summer and trying to rebuild all the time... it, it gets to a person.... Pretty soon you don’t know who you really are, you know?... So I got lost. I was lost for a long time. And sometimes today I still feel like that.*

Another female participant, Lynn, indicated how the impact of IRS lessened with talking about the experience. At the same time, her memories of residential school experiences did not go away:

*It gets easier, it gets easier when you, you know, talk about it but it’s still in the back of your mind. And it still hurts. Because to me, you know, it’ll always be there. And, you don’t immediately forget, you know, what you went through ’cuz [non-fluent] you know, these flashes come along and you know, you remember this, you remember that.*

Many other impacts were noted by participants, including trying to forget memories of IRS.

**Forgetting.** While Lynn was bothered by flashes of IRS memories, other participants endeavoured to forget. One male participant, Charles, stated emphatically that, “healing is forgettin’, forgettin’ whatever happened.... Forgetting all that ... 8 years of, you know, went through hell and all that.” Later in the interview, Charles indicated that he had tried to forget his residential school experiences, but this did not lead to healing:

*[I] drank a lot. You know, tryna forget. So alcohol. And then when I sobered up, see ... only of myself, you know... I don't think there was any healing, actual healing. I didn't go to any healing sessions or anything.*

Charles described that “drinking to forget” did not release the “stuff” locked inside him: “To be mad and drunk, thinking about all this *stuff* still locked in me. Just drinking to forget. Or just drinking to get drunk.” In other words, attempts to forget sustained and worsened the impact of IRS.

### **Turning Point: Disclosure**

Trying to forget about IRS was common among the participants. Nevertheless, many of the interviewees described disclosure of their IRS experiences as the turning point when their healing process was initiated. For Marianne, disclosure was the key element that initiated healing from her IRS experiences:

*And I don't know why today people don't want to talk about their story, 'cuz that's the only way I feel better about myself, is to be able to help somebody else with what I've done. 'Cuz that's a number one thing I started when I started healing. I had to face that. I had to deal with it, you know.*

Marianne had strong views about the importance of disclosure from the perspective of the listener and the speaker:

*Even if you don't feel like talkin', I said. Go and listen. 'Cuz by listening to somebody else's story, you'll gain a lot. Hey, I'm not the only one carrying this garbage, you know. You'll feel stronger. And as far as these people that are not telling their stories, I think they're gonna stumble. And stumble.*

For Marianne, both talking and listening had the power to transform isolation and elicit change.

Some participants had discussed their experiences with Elders or other former IRS students. For Howard, speaking with someone who had gone through similar experiences was imperative for healing:

*Oh. I know—healing you have to talk and but—you have to talk with people that actually went through something that you went through. So that you know and that they experienced the same thing. Instead of talking, talking to somebody that doesn't have an idea of what you're trying to say. ... You know, and to talk about what's bothering you, what's eating you, you know. To talk about it, it, it lightens it. It makes you feel lighter.*

For other participants, disclosure occurred in formal settings such as counselling. Sylvia described how her healing process began:

*Well, I never really started healing until I started taking classes and, you know, upgrading myself and especially when I went through this, uh, counselling classes that I took—this family counselling and that’s when I started, you know, when I started on healing myself through talking—talking over my problems and talking about myself. And what I came through. And also I never really knew my culture until I was into my social work... And that’s when I started taking classes in Native Studies and that. And that’s a nice—you know—[non-fluent] started seeing myself probably in a different way.*

Beyond the disclosure of participants’ experiences in residential school, there were other themes that were intertwined: reconnecting with culture, and spirituality/religion/faith as an ongoing process. We will review these themes below.

### **Reconnection with Culture**

Participants described reconnecting with their Aboriginal culture as an important component of their healing experiences. In Kelvin’s experience, participating in his culture took the place of formal counselling:

*Kelvin: Going to powwows and stuff like that and ... being around the Elders. Elders help a lot.*

*Interviewer: Around Elders? Do you talk with them?*

*Kelvin: Talk with them, yup. Yup. Sit with them and talk. We never actually did that, that part where we are supposed to go and look for a counsellor or something.*

For Howard, his connection to his culture had therapeutic potential:

*You go to places where, like powwows, that there—the music is soothing, it ... you know. It takes you back, it calms you, it relaxes you. And you always walk away feeling good about everything. Everything’s not so—you don’t have to get so mad about everything.*

Sylvia, who felt she had experienced a loss of identity as a result of residential school, described the benefit of seeing herself as a “Native person”:

*And we had healing circles and talking circles and we just literally, you know, went through, you know, whatever we could—and that helped me—that helped me some, anyway, you know and [non-fluent] I tried to—you know, started seeing myself as a*

*Native person and that I should be proud of who I am. And, you know, because like I could never be white. Although I, you know, lived the way ...*

Cultural practices served an important social support function which bolstered participants’ perceptions of themselves as Aboriginal people. Another significant aspect of reconnecting with culture was the inextricable link with participants’ perceptions of their spirituality, religion, and/or faith as ongoing healing practices. Connecting back to their culture was like returning home, returning to what they missed and wanted but had not gotten. In so doing, they linked into social supports that were culturally embedded.

### **Religion/Spirituality/Faith as an Ongoing Process**

In describing their personal healing practices, participants often portrayed an effective blend of spirituality, religion, and faith. Dennis explained how his spiritual beliefs from his culture and his adopted religion coincided:

*I think probably spiritually ... But when I go—I use both cultures. The Anglican and my culture. ... And they say, how come you can, how can you do that? Well, you pray to one Creator. Both religions, when we’re praying to the same Creator as Indian culture and ... Anglican culture. That’s what I think of, I don’t separate both.*

Jack also described a blend of formal religion and spirituality:

*Go to church in the morning, pray. First thing. Pray at night, the last thing you do. [My grandfather would say] just when the sun is rising. Listen to the birds. Look at the sky. Thank the Creator you’re here. ... And always, always, thank, thank the Lord that you got up healthy.*

Brenda demonstrated the relationship between her practice of rituals, such as prayer and smudging, and the diminishing effect of the pain of residential school:

*It’s not going to last forever. The pain that we have that we go through and ... there’ll be a day when it won’t be anything anymore. And it’ll be just a distant thought. But it doesn’t mean that it’s totally gone. Like I said, there’s going to be days where you have a good day, everything is good, and then it’s just like a process. Like a cycle. And ... it keeps just kind of repeating itself but less and less. And for me, I just—I smudge and I pray. I have a good day and I pray for everybody. Like healthy, sick, in prison; I pray for my family and my friends. I think that things turn out. And that one day we won’t—that it just won’t hurt as much anymore. That it’s not something I think about every day.*

In Marianne’s experience, spirituality was the essential ingredient for her “healing journey”:

*You know, I’ve been on a healing journey now since 1980. And I’m still healing but I heal through people and God. I really believe in my spirituality.*

**Forgiveness.** For some participants, spirituality could lead to forgiveness of self and others. A central part of spirituality for Dennis was forgiveness:

Dennis: *Forgiveness is the one that Creator gave us to do. And how else am I gonna get to up there without friggin’ forgiving people.*

Interviewer: *When did you finally—when did you get to the point of forgiving?*

Dennis: *When I started going to church.*

In the following passage, Brenda described her process of forgiveness:

*And it’s learning to let—say basically learning to forgive myself. And forgive those that have hurt me. And maybe, like, to write letters—to write a letter and then just burn it. . . . And just give it to the Creator. Is how I put it. ’Cuz there’s nothing you can do, really, to—to go back and change it?*

Thus, one aspect of spirituality/religion/faith as an ongoing process was the need to forgive in order to move beyond IRS experiences.

### **Moving Beyond IRS Impacts**

Participants spoke of the importance of changing IRS impacts for those affected and for subsequent generations. Marianne was emphatic about the need to overcome “residential garbage”:

*The reason why I opened my heart and my life is because I want them grandchildren to work and change like my kids been worryin’ for the upteen years. I don’t want my grandchildren, my [inaudible] to go on living with them issues. Residential garbage!*

Kelvin noted that “there’s still a lot of work and a lot of healing that’s gotta be done. Not just on our own part but with our children.”

**Education about IRS impacts.** To move beyond the impacts of IRS, participants identified the considerable role of educating the non-Aboriginal community. As an Elder in the community, Marianne had shared her IRS experiences with students at local schools. She described her perspective on revealing her story to the non-Aboriginal community:

*Just, you know, you gotta tell the truth! We’re not there to get pity. We don’t go there to go and get pity. But we want you to know what really happened to our Indian people. And why some of our brothers and sisters are still crawling the streets of [city].*

By telling their story, their truth, these participants felt they had moved beyond the worst effects of having been in residential schools—effects they witnessed others still struggling with in ineffective ways.

### **Limitations**

Because the participants were volunteers from two First Nations communities in Saskatchewan, our ability to generalize our findings to the larger population of former IRS students in Saskatchewan or in Canada is limited. Moreover, in our sample, the participants had attended different schools for various durations in separate time periods. Ideally, in qualitative research, the background characteristics of participants should be more homogeneous (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Despite this heterogeneity, we found striking similarities within this sample of former IRS students—particularly in their discussions of impacts and their views regarding the importance of culture and spirituality.

Another potential limitation of our study was that the interviewers were non-Aboriginal. This cultural difference could have affected the participants’ level of trust and the degree of disclosure during the interview. To manage this limitation, we were open with the participants regarding our previous experience with IRS and former students and emphasized the ethics of confidentiality and anonymity.

### **Discussion**

Our findings coincide with historical accounts of Aboriginal people’s experiences of IRS (Grant, 1996; Miller, 1996). Our analyses indicate that while participants in our sample remained negatively impacted by the effects of IRS attendance, they were active in their efforts to continue recovering from the consequences. Prior to our involvement with these participants, they had already begun a “healing journey” discourse. For these participants, the beginning of change or improvement was initiated by disclosure of negative IRS impacts, and the process of healing ensued through a complex interaction of reconnecting with culture and specific spiritual or religious practices. A few participants indicated motivation to move beyond the IRS legacy for the sake of subsequent generations and noted the need to educate the non-Indigenous community about IRS impacts.

These findings highlight the importance of considering “healing” within the context of the harms experienced. These participants could not speak of how they moved forward until after they had described what they had moved past. Their pain, past and ongoing, was the context they acknowledged before they could describe the ways they were moving beyond the impact of having attended residential school. Moreover, these qualitative findings are parallel to

epidemiological studies of Aboriginal mental health in Canada, where mental health problems in Aboriginal populations have been linked to cultural suppression and forced assimilation (Kirmayer, Tait, & Simpson, 2009). In our study, we heard the lingering impacts on individuals and their attempts to move past those experiences.

For these former students, to cope with IRS experiences it had become necessary to apply frequent doses of spirituality, cultural practices, or “forgetting.” Participants who engaged in the spiritual and cultural practices used the term *healing*; however, for those who tried to forget, healing was not an appropriate metaphor to describe their experiences. Thus, it is important to raise the issue of how “healing” was articulated by this sample of former students. Certainly, some participants used the language of healing in describing how they had moved on. But many of the participants did not use “healing” to describe their experiences since IRS. Some of these participants described their experiences to frame painful memories without using the language of healing. Other participants said that while they could not forget, they were able to describe the ways in which they had disentangled themselves from the negative effects they saw as persisting in other former students.

Consequently, there appear to be problems in using the concept of healing in the context of the effects of Indian residential schools. For those who are labelled as “healed” or “healing,” their ongoing struggle may be ignored. More importantly, healing could be a blaming concept whereby the onus for moving beyond the past is placed on those who have not healed. The injured parties are then solely responsible for the healing of their own injuries. Thus, we suspect that healing is a colonial term. That is, asking former students of IRS if they have healed is another process of establishing control over Aboriginal people and blaming them for what has happened to them. As such, pushing the rhetoric of healing may have the potential to produce additional harm to at least some former students of IRS.

We had stated that the original goal of our research program was to understand the meaning of healing from the perspective of former IRS students and to transfer this knowledge to mental health providers. Baskin (2016) has discussed the risk of cultural appropriation when helping professionals “Indigenize” their work, noting it can be hurtful and dangerous due to misuse and misunderstanding. She points out that Aboriginal people have been living holistically, incorporating spirituality “since the beginning of Creation” (p. 23). Moreover, she notes the “power imbalance between practitioners and service users” (p. 37). Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal practitioners need to acknowledge these issues before embarking on service provision to Aboriginal Peoples. One possible antidote to these cautions is what Baskin refers to as self-reflexivity. Self-reflexivity is the process of examining how the effects of your values, beliefs, acquaintances, and interests influence your work. In this context, the effects of your race, socioeconomic status, and religious beliefs should be added. Building a good helping relationship for professionals involves an examination of what aspects of themselves impact service users (Baskin, 2016).

Finally, we want to consider the goal of transferring this knowledge to mental health providers considering the findings of this study. Mental health practitioners must be aware of the

ongoing impacts of IRS attendance. The participants in this study could not discuss healing without setting out the context. Disclosure was likely a turning point for these participants because of a pervasive hidden truth: You cannot heal that which you do not acknowledge. Mental health practitioners, themselves, must challenge their colonial beliefs. Further, when healing occurred for participants, it took place in the context of reconnecting to Aboriginal culture and spirituality. Mental health providers will need to meet with cultural mentors and Elders, and immerse themselves in Aboriginal cultures and spirituality, before looking at ways to move toward physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being from an Aboriginal perspective (Lavallee & Poole, 2010).

### **Implications**

Mandatory education regarding IRS history from kindergarten to Grade 12 was one of the TRC report recommendations (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). One of the participants in this study was involved in school visits to share her residential school experiences. She viewed this activity as helpful for her own healing and for the reconciliation process. Our findings suggest that education about IRS history may be a potential avenue of meaning for former students, their families, and the non-Aboriginal community.

The essential healing elements of restoring culture and enhancing spiritual practices have been recognized in other studies (e.g., Reading & Halseth, 2013; Waldram, 2008). In documenting these participants’ perceptions of healing, we have added to the imperative for the government to enact the TRC’s Calls to Action regarding health, language, and culture. We have also documented the role Aboriginal spirituality and religion played in some participants’ perceptions of their post-IRS experiences. Participants attended church and traditional ceremonies without apparent conflict between the practices. How former students reconcile religious practices and Aboriginal spirituality is worthy of further investigation.

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